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Forgiving our Fathers, Finding Ourselves

At the end of Smoke Signals, a screenplay and film by Sherman Alexie, Thomas Builds-the-Fire poses the question “How do we forgive our fathers?” (147). He continues, “Shall we forgive them for pushing or leaning? Do we forgive our fathers in our age or in theirs? Or in their deaths? Saying it to them or not saying it? If we forgive our fathers, what do we have left?” (148). Sherman Alexie is attempting to answer these questions concerning fathers and sons in his texts, particularly his novels, Indian Killer and Reservation Blues and his screenplay and movie, Smoke Signals. In many of Sherman Alexie’s stories and poems the narrator’s relationship to his father is an issue. Whether asking for forgiveness, coping with the loss associated with an alcoholic, angry or distant father, or remembering a rare, joyful moment, Alexie's characters are searching for their identity in the wake of their fathers’ dysfunction.

A father need not be absent to be dysfunctional, but most dysfunctional fathers are absent. A dysfunctional father is one who cannot fully participate in their child’s development because of an addiction, emotional or physical difficulties or absence. These fathers are distant from their children, creating an emotional void difficult for a child to fill. According to Samuel Osherson, whose book Finding Our Fathers examines how men struggle to find their identity in the shadow of their father, “father absence provides fertile ground for a son’s mistaken imaginings about his father” (23). The void an absent father creates leaves room for the son to

insert his own identity, shaped by his father and most often marred by negative experiences.

Osheron explains the phenomenon of a son internalizing his father's identity.

We often misidentify with our fathers, crippling our identities as men. Distortions and myths shape normal men's pictures of their fathers, based on the uneasy peripheral place fathers occupied in their own homes. Boys grow into men with a wounded father within, a conflicted inner sense of masculinity rooted in men's experience of their fathers as rejecting, incompetent, or absent (Osheron 04).

Sherman Alexie's characters have either internalized or rejected their feelings toward their dysfunctional father's. Therefore, they attempt to find their identity through the expression of their father's addictions, anger towards their father or a contorted self-perception.

In order to determine the effect dysfunctional father's have on their children, particularly pertaining to Sherman Alexie's literature, it is important to define the dysfunctional father.

Sherman Alexie believes the dysfunctional father stems from a loss of the traditional rolls and a lack of spiritual fulfillment for men in the Native American community. In an interview with Dennis West, Alexie elaborates on his view,

...those traditional masculine roles - you know, hunter, warrior – they're all gone. I mean, driving a truck for the BIA is simply not going to fulfill your spiritual needs, like fishing for salmon or hunting for deer once did, so in some sense Indian men are much more lost and much more clueless than Indian women (West 04).

Dysfunctional and absent fathers are not unique to the Native American community, Sherman Alexie sees them being an issue relevant to many men today,

I think you'd find the same thing in every ethnic or racial community that it's fathers who are missing. I was doing an interview yesterday, and it came to me that brown artists- African American, Chicano, Indian, and so on- write about fathers who physically leave and don't come back. My father did leave to drink but he always came back (West 05).

In Sherman Alexie's novel Reservation Blues, there is a song beginning every chapter. The most important chapter to the discussion of the dysfunctional father is the chapter entitled "Father and Farther." The song beginning this chapter states in the chorus, "Now can I ask you, father / If you know how much farther we need to go?" (Blues 93) The characters in Reservation Blues are asking themselves how much more healing they need in order to reconcile their relationships to their fathers. Reservation Blues addresses the issue of the alcoholic father. The alcoholic father is dysfunctional because he is absent emotionally and physically due to his commitment to alcohol. Junior, Thomas and Victor in Reservation Blues are coming to terms with their childhoods spent in the presence of an alcoholic father.

Like many children of alcoholics, Thomas, Junior and Victor question whether they will become their father. In The Absent Father in Modern Drama, Paul Rosefeldt finds, "in the absence of the father, his children are failures, alienated from themselves and the world that surrounds them. In some cases, the child may become the father, follow his path or recreate a part of his life, (therefore) the search for the father is often a self-destructive one" (10). Alcoholic fathers are unpredictable, which cause their children to grow up quickly as they are unable to depend on their father to parent them, so the children must "parent" themselves. Victor and Junior, searching for their fathers through the recreation of his addictions have turned to alcohol to drown their sorrows and forget their childhood.

These characters are forced to confront the memory of their fathers when Samuel Builds-the-Fire shows up on Thomas's doorstep, passed out. At first, there is confusion as to whose father is passed out. Once it is confirmed that the passed out father belongs to Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Victor and Junior leave him to deal with the situation. When asked by Chess if they are going to help, Thomas replies, "it's my father, I have to handle this myself" (Blues 96). Thomas is referring to the fact that only the son can heal their relationship with their father; it has to be an individual journey. By placing his father on the kitchen table, Thomas is facing his father as a mirror for himself, which is both frightening and potentially healing. The fear of becoming his father is an issue for Thomas as well as Victor and Junior. Chess and Checkers expressed this fear when they said "they hated to see the fathers' features in his son's face. It's hard not to see a father's life as a prediction for his son's" (Blues 96). Thomas's fear of becoming an alcoholic is unfounded, as he is not an alcoholic and does not display addictive behaviors, but nevertheless, facing his father becomes a healing experience.

Samuel Osheron explains, "In learning about their fathers, sons can come to see them as separate people, different from them. That can help the separation-individuation process, as the son realizes that he is responsible for his own identity as a man, that he is not chained to his father's attitudes and values" (182). Chess symbolically expresses Thomas's identity in relation to his father in the following passage, "Chess looked across Samuel's body lying on that table, looked at Samuel's son, and wanted a mirror. *Here*, she wanted to say to Thomas. *You don't look anything like your father. You're much more handsome. Your hair is longer, and your hands are beautiful*" (Blues 116). Although Thomas experiences a sense of healing concerning his father, Junior and Victor are never able to come to terms with their absent fathers. Junior's relationship to his father is revealed in a dream, where he is forced to take care of his siblings as his parents

drink at the tavern. Huddled in the car with only soda and chips for dinner, Junior tries to please his parents by being a good babysitter to his brothers and sisters. But Junior fails to keep his siblings close, “He cried as each of his siblings climbed out of the car and ran away on all fours. They ran into the darkness; hands and feet sparked on the pavement” (Blues 111). Junior feels responsible for their disappearance, and in his dream his parents reinforce this guilt. They tell him, “*I don’t mean to say it’s all your fault, mother-and-father said, But it is all your fault*” (112).

Junior’s feelings of responsibility and guilt toward his alcoholic father never escape him, they translate to feelings of responsibility for Victor and guilt over the unborn child he had with Lynn. His healing crisis occurs when the band members are in New York City and Junior takes care of Victor when they go out drinking. Junior realizes he is enabling Victor to drink just as he enabled his parents to drink by being responsible for his siblings. At the bars, he also realizes his feelings of guilt towards Lynn because he could not be a father. In Finding Our Fathers, Samuel Osherson describes the emotions a father may have at the loss of a fetus; “the fetus may represent a future hope, an unarticulated but nonetheless real vision of himself as a father” (104). Junior felt that Lynn and his child was a chance to be the father he never had, and when Lynn had an abortion, Junior took it as a sign that he could never escape the identity of his father. Junior was unable to process his feelings of internalized guilt concerning an alcoholic father and his own potential fatherhood, which caused him to take his own life.

In Smoke Signals, Victor’s father Arnold is both an alcoholic and a distant father. Victor experiences his father’s alcoholism as a young boy, and in his early teens Arnold abandons Victor, leaving him with an unfulfilled space in his life, therefore becoming a distant father. Smoke Signals is perhaps the most hopeful picture of the reconciliation between fathers and sons

that Alexie paints. Although the resolution for Victor of his relationship with his father comes after his father's death, there is a sense of completion conveyed at the end of the screenplay. In an interview with Dennis West, Sherman Alexie admits to the autobiographical aspect of the relationship between fathers and sons in Smoke Signals,

The basic creative spark came from the trip I took with my friend. It's not my friend's story, but I placed my characters within that framework or going to pick up a father's remains. That's how the short story came about. It's more about my relationship with my father than about my friend's relationship with his father. My father is still alive, but he's had to struggle with alcoholism, as I have (03).

Through flashbacks in the screenplay, Alexie is able to illustrate the fragile relationship between an alcoholic father and his child, but also give a picture of a young man forced to reconcile his relationship to his father by his father's death. Sherman Alexie explains, "rather than focusing on a warrior/father struggling to return to his home, the plot turns on a warrior/son struggling to physically and emotionally find an alcoholic father who fled his home and died in self-exile" (West 01).

Smoke Signals is one of the only works of Sherman Alexie that gives a perspective from a father rather than a one-sided perspective from their son. Yet Alexie seems to focus on Arnold's "magical" ability, which represents his ability to disappear. Disappearing was exactly what Arnold did from Victor's life. In one of Victor's flashbacks, Arnold is driving him home on Independence day and he says he feels magical, "I'm magic. I'm magic. I just wave my hand and make it all disappear, send it somewhere else. I can make you disappear. Where do you want to go, Victor? ...I'm so good I can make myself disappear. Poof! And I'm gone" (Smoke 26). Victor's mother also understands Arnold's "magical" ability to cause pain as she explained to

Victor once Arnold had left for good, “yeah, your father is magic, enit? A real Houdini, huh? He sawed us into pieces, didn’t he? I feel like my head is in the kitchen, my belly’s in the bathroom, and my feet are in the bedroom” (Smoke 58). Suzy Song recognizes Arnold’s “magical” attributes as well, when Victor meets her in Phoenix, he asked if his father ever talked about him, Suzy replied, “He said you two were always playing basketball. He was always talking about some game you and he played against priests or something” (Smoke 86). Victor’s father told her Victor made the shot that won the game, but Victor’s shot actually lost the game. Suzy’s reply is, “he was a magician, you know?” (89). Arnold’s re-write of history to portray Victor as the victorious son illustrates Arnold’s attempt at reconciliation. Arnold knew that he caused both Victor and Arlene pain. He admitted to Suzy, who acts as a kind of confidante, “yeah, just like me. I broke three hearts, too” (82).

When his father dies, Victor is forced to confront the repressed anger and hurt he feels toward his father when he journeys to pick up his father’s ashes. “Picking up the remains,” means Victor is also picking apart his memories concerning his father and decided which of those memories he chooses to keep. Victor is trying to forge an identity independent of his father, as well as forgive his father for abandoning him. An important scene for Victor occurs when he runs to save the life of Julie who was injured in the car accident Victor and Thomas witnessed. This was his chance to feel like he was taking a self-less action to better someone’s life, unlike his father, who was essentially selfish in his inability to cope with alcoholism, which made Victor’s life more painful. Victor experiences a transformation through the run, mentally and physically. He is able to express this transformation when the police chief inquires about their drinking after the accident. Dennis West, in an interview with Sherman Alexie states, “there’s a stunning moment in the film when Victor tells the white police chief that he doesn’t

drink, that he's never drunk. It seems a declaration of a break with his father and his father's past, trying to overcome that difficult social problem" (05). Most importantly, for Victor, is the ability to let go of his anger and sadness toward Arnold. In a sense, the letting go is forgiveness, as holding on to his anger would be a recognition that Victor continued to feel sadness that could not be released, a "grudge." Victor likens the letting go of his father to housecleaning, "I thought it would be like cleaning out the attic, you know? Like throwing things away when they have no more use" (139). This is the first step for Victor to successfully forming his identity independent of the shadow of alcoholism cast by his father.

In Sherman Alexie's novel, Indian Killer, two types of dysfunctional fathers are explored, distant fathers and angry fathers. The distant father often appears to be normal although he is often as dysfunctional as the angry father. In the case of the distant father, who is emotionally absent, the son grows up feeling lost without a mirror in which to gauge his own identity. John Smith, in Indian Killer, was raised by Daniel who attempted to be a loving father but because of race inadvertently caused John to feel alienated and confused about his identity. John Smith's father, Daniel is a distant father, not because of an addiction or physical absence, but because of his race. Although John feels distant from his father, it is John who creates the distance and yet is also a victim of it. The bulk of the novel occurs when John begins to realize his relationship with Daniel is the source of John's feelings of loss. As Samuel Osherson describes it in his own experience, "when my difficult and conflicted relationship with my father came into focus, I realized that I had found the man I had been searching for, the father who, more by his absence than his presence, was the key to the sense of emptiness and vulnerability in my life" (xxi). Daniel tried to be a good father to John, providing him with what he thought was a proper education and upbringing. Daniel "worked hard for his family, brought home more than enough

money, and loved his wife and son” (Indian 318). Daniel attempted to close the distance between John and himself with his own education; Daniel read “most every Indian book that Olivia had set in front of him” (219). Daniel was almost overly concerned with the fact that John was Native American and adopted. Concerning the physical difference between John and Daniel, he recalls,

oh, there were lots of times when John was simply their son, with no need for any qualifiers, but the stark difference in their physical appearances was a nagging reminder of the truth. If Olivia and Daniel could not forget that John was adopted, then John must have carried that knowledge even closer to his skin (114).

Daniel’s overemphasis of John’s ethnic heritage is essentially at the root of John’s identity crisis. Not only does John feel he is without a tribe because his birth mother’s tribe is not known, he feels he is without a family because Daniel always emphasized the difference between them instead of the fact that they were a united family. John’s identity issues also arise from the conflict within him between his white father, who nurtured him, and the white men who took him away from his Indian mother. He is both angry and hurt, wanting Daniel to be a father to him while resenting Daniel’s very existence. At the end of the novel, “John knew that the man in the white jumpsuit was to blame for everything that had gone wrong. Everything had gone wrong from the very beginning, when John was stolen from his Indian mother” (379). John feels he must deny Daniel’s existence from this point on, but he is still conflicted, alternately seeing Daniel as a father and renouncing him. While John is contemplating his suicide, he imagines Daniel, “I don’t have a father, John thought, but he saw Daniel dribbling a basketball in the driveway. *Like this*, Daniel was shouting, *like this*” (397). But minutes later, when falling to his death, John feels there was “an Indian father...out there beyond the horizon” (413). John was not

able to forgive Daniel and the “white jumpsuit man” for tearing him from his Indian mother, consequently, he was never able to forgive himself for being Indian.

The angry father creates an absence of love and nurturing that spurs their child to internalize anger and violence. These children, like Reggie in *Indian Killer*, are unable to process the shame and sadness they feel concerning their father, so they react with violence towards a scapegoat either similar to their father or “approved” by their father.. Reggie Polatkin was raised by an angry father who caused Reggie to feel conflicted about his identity and turn his confusion into rage. Reggie’s father was white and his mother Spokane, and Reggie suffered his father’s anger towards “dirty Indians.” Bird Lawrence, “. . .hated hostile Indians so much that he insisted Reggie use Polatkin, his Indian surname, until he’d earned the right to be a Lawrence, until he’d become the appropriate kind of Indian” (92). Bird drilled Reggie on facts about “dirty Indians” he deemed important and beat him if Reggie did not reply properly, “come on you little shit,” Bird had whispered. “You want to be a dirty Indian your whole life? What’s the answer?”

“Dad, I don’t know.”

“What?”

“I don’t know, I’m sorry.”

Bird slapped Reggie across the face (91).

Reggie responds to his father’s anger by internalizing it and believing it is his own. In adulthood, he expresses rage at whites with “blue eyes,” a feature common to both his father and himself. His rage indicated his internalization of his father’s anger. Not only does Reggie hate his father because he is white and because of the abuse Reggie experienced in childhood, Reggie hates himself for being both white, like his father and Indian, like the race his father deems “dirty.” Reggie was also unable to accept nurturing from his mother because of the indoctrination that

she is Indian, the identity Reggie needed to deny, therefore he feels emotionally unfulfilled and expresses this through his rage. Reggie felt denying his mother was the key to his success, “Reggie had come to believe that he was successful because of his father’s white blood, and that his Indian mother’s blood was to blame for his failures” (94). Reggie’s most violent act was towards a young, white traveler on whom Reggie’s reenacts his father’s pattern of questioning and beating. Reggie assumes the violent roll of his father and in an act of defiance pushes the white mans eyes into his head, “...searching for whatever existed behind them” (259). Rather than creating a type of closure for Reggie, the violence towards this white man only leads him to feel more anger and alienation. Reggie fantasized about killing white people while his thoughts were on his father. “That brutal stranger who pretended to be Reggie’s father. Reggie wondered if he’d been stolen away from his real family. Maybe there was an Indian family out there who was missing a son. Maybe Reggie belonged to them” (320). As Reggie’s violence escalates, it becomes certain there is no closure for Reggie. Because he is unable to recognize the source of his anger and pain, Reggie is not able to confront his identity issues that are intertwined with his father. At the end of the novel, Sherman Alexie leaves Reggie’s fate to be decided, yet gives a general sense of his continuing pattern of rage towards whites with the passage, “ Reggie pointed up the highway, pointed north or south, east or west, pointed toward a new city, though he knew every city was a city of white men” (409).

In analyzing Sherman Alexie’s answer to Thomas Builds-the-Fire’s question, “How do we forgive our fathers?” (Smoke 147) one would believe the answer is through self-destruction. John, in Indian Killer and Junior, in Reservation Blues commit suicide because they are unable to forgive themselves or their fathers. This is an all too real and common answer, but Alexie gives another, more hopeful answer in Victor, from Smoke Signals. Victor faces his fathers past,

a painful and difficult process, and is transformed by the experience, coming through it with a greater understanding of having an identity separate from his father. Victor's process could be considered holistic, as Samuel Osherson calls this "a life long father-son dance...the partners seem separate yet are joined moving apart then coming closer as the dance evolves, their seemingly independent actions actually united by deeper rhythms" (12). The answer to Thomas builds-the-fire's final question, "If we forgive our fathers, what do we have left?" (Smoke 148), according to Sherman Alexie is "ourselves, our identity." But if we do not forgive our fathers, we have everything to lose.

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